

In the dressing room, Titta feels lighter, he's lost five pounds of tension and now he trades hugs and kisses with Lello, Rino, Gino, and Yours Truly. They shout and sing a stadium fight song as if they'd just won the Italian championship. Sweaty and happy. I look at them indulgently, but I don't sing, I'm the bandleader and I have to play the role of the guy who knew the whole time that this New York thing was going to turn out fine. Jenny Afrodite, my manager, rushes into the dressing room, with his square-cut insignificant little face, with the stubborn lock of hair that dangles obsessively over his forehead, and the little diamond stud penetrating his left ear, making him look six months younger tops, and he stills the chorus with a phrase that rings out like a thunderclap on the verge of sleep.

"Boys, Sinatra's outside. He wants to say hello."

A fragile silence falls. An existential silence. With the speed of the cheetah that hears a gunshot, I turn and focus on the luminous mirror. I fix my hair. My red hair. Dyed. Bleached. Mahogany-hued. Hair that looks like that of the Italian psychic Silvan, the helmet hair of a maniac. I brush it back, with one long stroke, and I fasten my dressing gown around me. I gesture to Jenny with one arm, a gesture with a distinctly dictatorial flair. Unforgettable.

And the door swings open. Titta trembles and apologizes to himself for having self-criticized on occasion, for having failed to love himself adequately, at times. The sound of rhythmic, catlike footsteps comes from the hallway. The footsteps of several people. The wall-to-wall carpeting raped. The bodyguards come in first, and then Frank appears, stumbling, wobbly, red-faced, like southern Italian peasants I have known. Frank walks over to me, extends his hand, upon which there sprawls a ring that lists at 122,000 dollars. An orgasm of diamonds.

I reply with my thirteen million-lire ring, one-tenth the value, purchased from the goldsmiths on Via Marina. The two hands clasp. The rings touch with a clinking sound that escaped nobody. Fifth Avenue versus Via Marina, an un fair match-up. Titta looks down at his wedding ring, humiliated, and, at the most important moment of his life, underwriting new and previously unexplored inferiority complexes. Theories and ideologies of new forms of generosity, in contrast, blaze paths within me. I feel an impulse to give a gift of cocaine to old

Frank, but I contain myself. Barely.

Frank, shorter than even the most pessimistic prediction, indulges in a couple of poses worthy of an emperor, before taking a seat in my chair, the only perch in the dressing room. Me and my group, standing, wait for the oracular statement that can make or break an entire career. In a completely inopportune manner, Lello Cosa remembers that he is a brilliant comedian, as well as a talented drummer.

“Doesn’t he look like Napoleon?” says Lello Cosa, looking around in search of the unlikely complicity of his fellow band members. I look daggers at him, and promise myself to fire him at the first opportunity. Thank God, Sinatra didn’t get it. Frank sits there, still wordless, the tension rises, there is a tension so indescribable that it truly rivals the humidity in the dressing room. Sinatra, as slowly as a heroin addict, pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Like a herd of giraffes, we crane our necks to glimpse the brand name on the pack. But we’ve never heard of this brand. They’re called “Sinatra.”

Frank places the cigarette between his lips, as if in a slowmotion musical, then he pulls out a 1958 Dupont platinum lighter and puts together a sentence in halting Italian.

*“Questo me lo ha regalato Marilyn Monroe.”*

It was a gift from Marilyn Monroe. Now, anxiety. So. Much. Anxiety.

*“Il concerto is good, ma ricordati una cosa Tony, il successo . . . il successo sta sul cesso,”*

Frank Sinatra says haltingly, with a burst of alcoholic laughter at his little play on words. He says it was a good concert, but don’t forget, Tony, success is on the toilet.

*Il successo sta sul cesso.* Success is on the can.

Excerpt translated by Antony Shugaar. Courtesy of Europa Editions.